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ABSTRACT

Several studies of attrition from encounter and therapy groups have identified anxiety about self-disclosure as a common cause of early therapy termination. If such anxiety also contributes to attrition from interpersonal skills training groups, then time and funds invested in training mental health paraprofessionals may be lost. The relationship between trainee self-disclosure and training program attrition was investigated using data from the UCLA Helping-talk Project. Before the training program, the 208 subjects completed a self-disclosure measure. Results showed that the pretraining level of self-disclosure significantly discriminated attrition from participant subjects for trained subjects, but not for control subjects. Trainees who failed to complete the training program had significantly lower self-disclosure scores than those who completed the training. Results may indicate a need for alteration of the content of the packaged communication skills training programs. (JAC)

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Initial Level of Self-Disclosure as a Predictor of Attrition From a Communication Skills Training Program For Paraprofessionals

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Paraprofessionals with short-term, task-specific training now make up a significant proportion of the nation's mental health workforce. For many, training consists of participation in one of the numerous packaged instructional programs in interpersonal communication which have been developed over the past decade such as Ivey's Microcounseling (1971), Goodman's SASHAtapes (1978), and Kagan's Interpersonal Process Recall (1976). These communication skills training programs generally provide a combination of didactic and experiential training to participants. Each divides communication behavior into simple, rehearsable segments, delineating certain helper attitudes and behaviors considered important in developing basic interpersonal skills. Nearly all of the programs utilize a small-group format, with a combination of didactic and experiential activities. Most training programs include structured practice sessions for facilitating trainees' acquisition of the skills presented as well as role-playing of helper-client interaction by trainees. Typically, trainees take turns assuming client and counselor roles with one trainee disclosing a personal concern to the other, who attempts to be helpful using the skills presented in the program. Such activities often include trainees critiquing each other's therapeutic response styles as well as exploration of trainees' reactions to being in a helping role. Several packaged program developers (e.g., Kagan, 1979; Truax and Carkhuff, 1967) have asserted that these experiential training activities, consisting largely of self-disclosure of one form or another, are the most crucial element of their respective programs. This emphasis on self-disclosure is not incidental. Most of the packaged programs originated in whole or in part from the client-centered tradition, which provided the research on the relationship between the so-

called "core therapeutic conditions" (nonpossessive warmth, accurate empathy, and genuineness; Rogers, 1957) and positive client outcome. In encouraging interpersonal openness in the training activities, the programs seek to foster genuineness and congruence on the part of the trainees which will transfer to their later work with clients.

Paraprofessional training programs often bring together people from various cultural and subcultural backgrounds with differing norms for and experiences with self-disclosure. For many, unaccustomed to small-group self-disclosure with nonintimates, the training group atmosphere may be foreign and uncomfortable. Indeed, Kagan (1979) observed that self-disclosure during the training group activities is the most difficult task for most participants in his training program.

Several studies of attrition from encounter and therapy groups (e.g., Sethna and Harrington, 1971; Yalom, 1975) have identified anxiety over self-disclosure as a common reason for early termination. Based on the results of these studies, one might expect discomfort with self-disclosure to also contribute to attrition from interpersonal skills training groups. Such attrition, if demonstrated, threatens the cultural diversity of the training agency's (future) staff and represents a loss on precious trainer-hours and agency funds invested into training.

The relationship between trainee self-disclosure and training program attrition was investigated using data from the UCLA Helping-talk Project, a communication skills training research study conducted by the Interpersonl Process Research Group of the UCLA Psychology Department. The 208 subjects in this study, recruited from the campus and adjacent communities, comprised a heterogeneous group, including trainees of a wide age range, and diverse ethnic and

educationsl backgrounds. Subjects were randomly assigned to training or control groups. Training content consisted of an early version of Goodman's SASHAtapes. This program is based on a theoretical framework of help-intended communication (Goodman and Dooley, 1976) which organizes help-intended communication into six response categories: question, advisement, silence, reflection, interpretation, and self-disclosure. Each 1½ hour training session focusses on one of the six response modes, combining mini-lectures, group exercises, examples, group discussions, outside assignments and summaries.

Before beginning the training program, all 208 subjects participated in a pretraining assessment session. Among other measures, they completed the Disclosure Selection Questionnaire (Worthy, Gary and Kahn, 1969). This paper-and-pencil measure consists of a list of 35 topics of a personal nature, ranging in depth of intimacy from "your favorite television program" to "your habits and plans concerning the use of birth control techniques". The directions instruct the subject to check the items he might be willing to discuss with a group of people she or he is meeting for the first time. The measure seeks to predict the depth of intimacy of the subject's disclosures within the training group. The work of Jourard and his associates (e.g., Jourard, 1971) demonstrated that it is this dimension of self-disclosure (depth of intimacy of disclosures) that is most closely associated with anxiety and discomfort about self-disclosure. Among listeners who are not close associates of the discloser (such as other members of her/his training group), the less guarded, more intimate a disclosure, the more potentially anxiety-provoking it is; the more uncomfortable one is with disclosure, the more guarded and superficial the disclosures one tends to make.

Based on the theorized relationship between trainee self-disclosure and attrition, it was hypothesized that trainees' pretraining level of self-disclosure, as measured by the Disclosure Selection Questionnaire, should be predictive of their later Attrition Status (that is, whether they complete the training program or not). Since the relationship between pretraining self-disclosure level and attrition is postulated to derive from elements of the training experience, pretraining scores on the disclosure measure should not be predictive of Control subjects' Attrition Status (that is, whether they returned to complete research measures following the end of the trained subjects' training program, 7 weeks after they completed pretraining assessment measures.

In all, 22% (or 45) of the 208 subjects were considered Attritions. This included 29 Trained Condition subjects and 16 Controls. Discriminant analyses were used to test the power of subjects' pretraining disclosure scores for predicting their later Attrition Status. Separate analyses were performed for Trained and Control subjects to allow comparison of the predictive power of the self-disclosure scores for Trained versus Control subjects.

Those Training Condition subjects who completed the training program and those Control subjects who fulfilled their commitments to return to complete research measures were labelled "Participants". As illustrated on Table I, results showed that pretraining level of self-disclosure significantly discriminated Attrition from Participant subjects for Trained but not Control subjects. Trainees who failed to complete the training program had significantly lower self-disclosure scores than those who did. The mean self-disclosure score for Control Participants did not differ significantly from Control Group Attritions.

The variances of the self-disclosure scores for Participant and Attrition groups were compared for both Trained and Control groups and did not differ significantly for either.

The effect size for the results was .19, using Cohen's γ statistic (1977), indicating an effect of moderate magnitude.

One important methodological issue in this study is the use of a self-report measure of self-disclosure. The known reactivity of such measures suggests that replication with a behavioral measure of self-disclosure may be advisable.

The results of this study have several implications for improvement of training outcome and reduction of attrition in paraprofessional training programs. If low-disclosing trainees tend to drop out more often than others, one option is to reject low-disclosing volunteers. This could be accomplished by pretesting all applicants to assess their self-disclosing behabior. Being a selection scheme, this strategy decreases the proportion of applicants accepted into the training program. Thus, it is especially well sutied for a training agency short on time and having a significantly larger number of applicants for the training program than the number of openings for new trainees.

A second strategy for decreasing attrition would be to hold a pretraining workshop preparing trainees for training activities requiring self-disclosure (and any other possibly threatening activities). Whalen (1969) used modelling of what she considered appropriate self-disclosure with verbal instructions encouraging disclosure to increase interpersonal openness in small groups of subjects. Such a workshop or orientation would require more time and agency staff involvement than the selection strategy but would allow a 100% selection ratio. This would make it suitable for

agencies desiring a large number of trainees.

Another more general implication of the results applies to leader-led training programs. The results of this study indicate the importance of sensitizing leaders to the anxiety sometimes associated with self-disclosure in training activities. A sensitive and supportive training leader would likely contribute to trainees being more comfortable in taking the interpersonal risks demanded by the training activities.

Finally, the results of this study may indicate a need for alteration of the actual content of the packaged communication skills training programs. Though this study only considered the SASHAtapes program, virtually all of the widely used programs put similar demands on participants. The results of this study suggest that program developers may need to be more accommodating and responsive to trainees' varying norms for self-disclosure and the common anxiety associated with interpersonal openness in the small group. This might be approached in various ways: 1) bringing the matter out into the open for discussion and exploration, possibly through exercises in the initial session; 2) encouraging group support and sensitivity in training activities, especially those involving interpersonal risk-taking; and 3) shaping activities flexibly enough to free trainees from pressure to disclose more intimately than is comfortable, perhaps increasing demands for risk-taking gradually as the training program goes on and as group members become more comfortable with each other.

Some critics of the packaged paraprofessionsl training programs point out tha, by and large, they were developed by and researched with white, middle-class individuals, and are tied to the language, norms and values of the majority culture. Thus, despite the fact

that a substantial number of paraprofessionals are members of minority groups, with many working in nonwhite and/or lower class communities, the majority of paraprofessional training programs may be inappropriate for use by these members of the mental health workforce. Admittedly, these assertions are subject to debate but are among the broader issues raised by this study.

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Table I

Discriminant Analysis - Attrition Status

Predicted by Self-Disclosure

	Trained	Controls
Participants	$\bar{X}$ = 86.64*	$\bar{X}$ = 90.24
	SD = 43.76	SD = 44.16
	N = 114	N = 49
Attritions	$\bar{X}$ = 66.76	$\bar{X}$ = 82.50
	SD = 34.82	SD = 45.65
	N = 29	N = 16
Total	$\bar{X}$ = 82.68	$\bar{X}$ = 88.34
	SD = 42.75	SD = 44.30
	N = 143	N = 65

*$p < .05$

Trained: $F=5.197$; $dfs=1,141$; $p < .03$; $\gamma = .19$

Controls: $F=.365$; $dfs=1,63$: $p < .60$